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## Rivers of Wood

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## *Rivers of Wood*

There are nights I lie awake and can't remember my life before I started at the mill. The farthest back I can go is the day Gary Wright caught a sliver in his eye and Chatten came to work in Gary's place. A sliver in the eye isn't such a bad thing. We didn't see why Gary had to lose his job over it. It wasn't like he cut anything off.

Missoula Lumber hires three winos for every hard worker, and Chatten we figured for a wino. He was over six feet tall and strong, but it was obvious he hadn't worked in a mill before. He didn't even have gloves. There was an extra pair in the washroom but nobody offered them to him.

The first morning he came over from the Job Service, I watched him pull four-quarter oak off the planer and pile it in a loose heap on a cart. In no time at all he had a terrible mess.

"Do you know what you're doing?" shouted the foreman, Duffy. Grant Duffy was a pretty fair football player once. He tried to go to college on football a couple of times but always had trouble keeping his weight down.

He made a big production out of turning off the planer and waiting for the knives to stop spinning. Duffy meant to tell the world how tough it was working with guys like Chatten. He had that look in his eye.

"Why didn't you tell me how you wanted it done in the first place?" asked Chatten. He was soft spoken, but his voice was so deep it sounded like it came all the way up from his shoes. I could see Duffy's neck swell. If the owner of the mill, a college type named Henries, hadn't come onto the floor just then, ranting and raving about a shipment of door stop that got sent half way to Moscow, Russia, instead of Moscow, Idaho, Chatten might have wished he'd kept his mouth buttoned.

We discovered we were going to miss Gary Wright. At noon, Chatten sat against the wall by his bicycle while he built his lunch. He ate strange food. He didn't eat lunchmeat, and I don't know if he even ate bread. He brought a bag of crackers made from rice and a jar of brown spread that looked like peanut butter, only wasn't. Then he made a kind of sandwich out of that, topping the whole mess off with sprouts and a trickle of honey. Half of it never got past his beard.

Gary Wright on the other hand had normal habits, and he'd always had

the best jokes to tell at lunch. He didn't go in for the real nasty ones. Mostly he told ethnic jokes but he wasn't prejudiced either. He would tell a joke about Mexicans, then one about blacks, then Indians. We had some Hmong boys working in the mill, and Gary was getting up a few Hmong jokes. He didn't have it out for any one group.

We tried to tell jokes like Gary did, but none of us were as good at it. Chatten's first day I told the one about putting velcro on the ceiling so little black kids won't jump on the bed. And Vernon Waddy told the one about what happens when a black marries a Puerto Rican, but he got it screwed up.

Then I started to tell the one about why there were only ten thousand Indians at Custer's last stand. I never got to the punch line.

"My wife's Indian," said Chatten.

I couldn't remember the rest. A couple of guys laughed like the joke was on me and Duffy came in glaring, told us all to get back to work. He glared twice at Chatten.

I didn't see Chatten again until five o'clock when I went to the lunchroom to get my thermos. He was standing next to his bike, an old-fashioned Schwinn with fat tires, and pulling splinters out of his hands with his teeth.

"Is this a joke, too?" he asked in that same voice he used on the foreman.

I could see from across the room that someone had let the air out of his tires. I figured if I didn't want an enemy for life I should offer him a ride home.

It had been snowing all day, so lucky for him, I thought, that somebody *had* let the air out of his tires. But you couldn't make him admit he was thankful for the ride. He hardly said a word all the time he was in my truck, even when we slid through an intersection and almost hit a station wagon.

We took the underpass to the other side of the Burlington Northern tracks where I suspected Chatten and his old lady lived in a mobile home. That's about the cheapest way to live. But then he said, "Right here," and had me pull up in front of a big white tipi. There was a painting of a blue buffalo on one side, or maybe an ox. He caught me staring at it.

"There aren't any blue buffalo," I said.

"You're right," said Chatten, and he stood there on the sidewalk until I drove away.

February was bitter. Night after night the pilot light went out on my furnace, and I woke up shivering. If I get too cold the muscles in the small of my back ache, sometimes for days.

One morning about five I couldn't get back to sleep even after I relit the furnace, so I got up and sat in a chair. While I was waiting for the paperboy to come, I could hear the woman downstairs arguing with her boyfriend about how often he wanted sex. It put me in a bad mood.

When I got to work, I found Duffy in the lunch room peeling an orange and



telling an Indian joke to the Hmongs. He can't tell jokes, but he's so big and awful that most of the guys wait around until the end to laugh.

"Talk about Indian jokes," I said, "you should see where this guy Chatten lives."

"Screw Chatten," said Duffy, like it was an order.

"No thank you," I said right back, and I could see Duffy didn't like that. "He lives in a damn tipi."

Nobody said anything. I thought maybe the Hmongs didn't know what a tipi was.

"You know, like the goddam wild Indians lived in," I said. I heard the can flush and Chatten came out of the men's room. He went over to study the different lists of rules pinned on the bulletin board and he didn't look at me.

"What kind of Indians?" asked Duffy. He stuck half his orange in his mouth and grinned at me.

"Never mind," I said.

"You help Chatten on the planer," said Duffy. He spit a half dozen seeds onto the floor, still grinning. "You guys will make a great team."

We ran the planer together for two weeks. Both of us were determined that we weren't going to screw up, but that was no reason to talk to each other. I fed the boards in at one end and Chatten caught them at the other. That first morning, when we stopped for a minute so Duffy could bring up a new bunk of rough lumber, I showed Chatten a couple of tricks I'd seen guys use to stack the boards easier. After that he didn't have any trouble.

We planed oak, ash, cherry, maple, birch. Working on the planer is like holding rocks under running water and watching what happens. Beautiful patterns come out, like the plowed fields you see from an airplane. Like rivers of wood, the way a creek will wind around and double back on itself in flat country. One afternoon we surfaced a small bunk of cedar and for a day the mill smelled like a hope chest. It made me remember one of my sisters had a hope chest once. I don't know what she put in it, except towels. She had a lot of bath towels in there.

Planing was hard work, but Chatten and I learned to get along. Sometimes an oversize board would jam up on me and Chatten would come around and help push until the knives could clean up a big knot. I didn't have to ask him.

If my back was bothering me, we would switch for a while so I could tail. I noticed from time to time Chatten's hands would be bleeding, but he didn't complain. He just wouldn't give in to wearing gloves.

It was only normal that somebody eventually took exception to Chatten's lunch. The most unusual thing any of the guys was likely to bring to eat was

a slice of banana bread his old lady had baked for the kids. And he'd eat that on the sly.

Across the street from the mill lived a crippled lady with her dachshund, Pete, who made a habit of doing his morning chores just outside the mill door. One morning while we were planing eight-quarter walnut, somebody went out in the snow and gathered four frozen dog turds about the size of Vienna sausages and used those rice crackers to make Chatten a sandwich. When twelve o'clock came, Chatten took one look in his lunch and just left the room, not giving anybody the satisfaction of seeing him pissed off. Everybody laughed too hard, and I knew Duffy was behind it.

I ate most of my lunch, then went out to where Chatten was sitting on the bunk of cherry that we were going to plane next.

"You want a sandwich?" I asked. "It's baloney, but it's good baloney. It's real mayonnaise."

"No thanks," he said. He was wearing an old jacket that said "49ers" on the back in faded blue letters. He turned the pockets inside out and we watched two handfuls of sawdust fall to the floor.

"Any reason," he asked, "why we can't get back to work a little early?"

It had never been done but I couldn't think of the reason why. When we fired up the planer, Duffy came out to stare at us, then stare up at the clock, then back at us, but he couldn't think of any company rules we were breaking, either. Except for the unwritten rule that says do as little as possible when the boss isn't around.

But going back to work a half hour early wasn't too good an idea. The others tried to ignore us, they just couldn't ignore the planer for long. It sounds like a 747 revving up for take off inside your hall closet. It's nothing you want to eat lunch to.

Duffy turned the lights off on us. But it doesn't get that dark in the middle of the afternoon, even if the mill is as cold and damp as a cave in winter. I glanced toward the lunchroom to see who was playing with the lights and saw two guys pull their pants down and stick their butts through the lunchroom door. I hadn't seen anyone do that in a while and it made me laugh.

Duffy dug up an orange frisbee and threw it clean across the mill at us, bouncing it off the rip saw and one of the molders. Some other wise guys thought they'd use the dog turds from Chatten's lunch for baseballs. At least they were still frozen, pretty much. Everybody got in on the act. The Hmong, who were practicing driving the forklift in little circles, started honking the horn at us, shave-and-a-haircut.

Times like that, somebody's always got to carry things too far, like Duffy deciding the frisbee wasn't enough. He came tearing out of the lunchroom on Chatten's bicycle, trying to ride without any hands and juggle the frisbee and two cans of coke. When he started to lose his balance, in a desperate act he flung the frisbee at us again, this time sending it straight into the knives of the



planer. Little bits of orange plastic came spitting out the other side and I had to turn it off. Chatten was staring at Duffy with a look that said 'I don't believe this for a minute.'

"It's just a frisbee," I told him. Then I saw what Chatten was upset about. The foreman had crashed into a pile of scrap lumber with Chatten's bike, and the Hmong boy driving the forklift had speared the rear wheel before he could remember how to raise the fork or even how to step on the brakes. He'd torn the chain completely off the hub and broke six or eight spokes as well.

Even then, things could probably have been smoothed over if Duffy had said he was sorry and offered to pay for a new wheel. Instead he took a swing at the kid on the forklift, and he yelled at Chatten.

"I guess you'll wait for everyone to go back to work from now on, chief," said Duffy. "You'll quit trying to be so goddam different." He walked back to the lunchroom, trying not to limp.

Chatten picked up the pieces of his bicycle. He was holding himself in so hard his eyes were going bloodshot.

"We'll see about being different," he said.

I gave him a ride home again. This time he wouldn't even speak to give me directions to his house, although that's no big thing. I've lived in Missoula all my life. I know my way around.

"Come on in," he said when I pulled up in front of the tipi.

"Well," I said and I was stalling, trying to think of a way to stay in the truck, "what do you do in there? I mean, can you sit down?"

I was tired and I didn't really want to stand stooped over in any damn tipi just to watch Chatten's old lady grind little seeds into peanut butter.

"Come on," said Chatten. He walked up to a little brick house in the next lot and waited on the porch for me.

"This is your house?" I asked.

"We're just renting," said Chatten. He unlaced his boots and left them on the back porch, had me do the same.

They lived in a normal house. They had a kitchen table and a tv and refrigerator and everything. His wife was sitting at the table with some books spread out in front of her.

"How'd it go today?" she asked, and the way she asked I knew Chatten had told her all about the mill and the bastards he had to work with.

"Better," he said and he kissed her. She was a pretty girl, though not really so young. I thought she might be pregnant. She moved careful, the way pregnant women do.

"Want a cup of coffee?" asked Chatten.

"I can't stay," I told him, but I took the cup he had already poured. I felt like I wasn't supposed to be there. They had a nice home for a rental. The

floors were polished — quarter-sawn oak like you can't buy anymore — and I could see a big oriental rug in the living room with a unicorn on it. A pot simmered on the stove. The whole kitchen smelled sweet and warm like onions. The coffee was good, too, the blackest coffee I ever drank, but not bitter.

"I better run," I said, trying to finish what was in my cup.

"You married?" asked Chatten's wife. "You could stay for dinner." I could tell she meant it, and Chatten looked like he was starting to relax now that he was out of the mill.

I wasn't sure he would understand why I didn't stay. I wasn't sure I knew why myself. I liked their house a lot. It reminded me of my grandmother's place in Polson and I liked my grandmother, too. I guess I felt myself starting to like them, and I wasn't ready to do that.

"Who owns the tipi?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," said Chatten. "A bunch of leftover hippies hang around over there in the summer." That's what he called them. Leftovers.

"Isn't it awful?" said his wife.

"I kind of like it," said Chatten, the hard look coming back to his face. I gave him his empty coffee cup.

"Tomorrow," he said, instead of saying good-bye.

I went home. I found the woman downstairs crying in her living room, her front door open. She had her bathrobe on and she didn't care if I stared in or not. Her boyfriend was leaving with a suitcase that wouldn't close right and a big ivy plant in a fancy pot.

"You keep the rest," he said, but she didn't answer.

Upstairs the furnace had gone out again, and the place smelled like gas. I propped the window open and waited for enough of the smell to go away so I could relight the pilot. It seemed like my apartment was quieter than usual. Nobody sat at my kitchen table with books spread out in front of her. There wasn't any pot of onions boiling on my stove, and no coffee made either. There was only someone slamming the front door downstairs.

I got out my baseball bat and worked over the furnace a little bit. I felt better after that.

The next morning when Chatten's wife dropped him off for work, I waved to her and she called me over to the car.

"Don't let him be stupid," she said. She lit a cigarette and took a hit off it, watching Chatten's back go through the mill door. It surprised me to see her smoke, a pregnant lady.

"Don't worry," I told her. She took another drag on her cigarette and threw it into the snow.



I went into the lunchroom where the boys were gathered around the coffee pot. They were watching Chatten out of the corner of their eye, and I couldn't tell if they were still laughing at him or if they were starting to get embarrassed about riding him so hard. I figured things would start to get easier for him.

Chatten took off his coat and hung it on one of the many nails pounded into the wall of our lunchroom for our convenience. Then he took off his cap and hung it up, too, and I heard someone grunt.

Chatten had shaved his head.

He hadn't shaved the whole thing which wouldn't have been so bad. He shaved the sides but he left the middle long like that black giant on television. Only of course, Chatten wasn't any black giant. He looked like the last Mohican Indian and he looked a little bit like the drummer in some punk rock band.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I think you better keep your cap on," I told him.

"I could do that for awhile." Chatten took his cap, a blue wool thing, down off the wall. "I want Duffy to get the full effect."

"Oh, Duffy," said one of the Hmong boys, nodding his head.

Duffy gave us three bunks of barn wood and put us on the planer again. He knew my back was killing me after all that time on the planer, but he was too big a prick to let me switch to a molder or tally lumber for a bit.

Used wood is a pain in the butt, too. The boards get warped and twisted from all those years on the side of some old barn. But to look at Chatten you'd have thought somebody just gave him a raise.

"I'll feed," said Chatten. It was all the same to me. I stuck plugs in my ears, then pulled a headset on over them. That way when Chatten started up the planer it only sounded like one jet and not a whole squadron of jets.

Chatten looked his boards over carefully, butting them up against each other as he fed them into the knives. He had learned quick enough. The boards he planed were just as free of snipe as anybody's. He fed a dozen through without any hangups, and I stopped paying attention.

I thought about the woman in the apartment below me. I'd never talked to her much. The night before, I was just getting into the spirit of things, giving the furnace a few good licks, when I looked up and saw her in the doorway. She was wearing that bathrobe, and even with her hair a mess and her eyes kind of runny, she surprised me how good she looked standing there.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

I guess I'd been making a lot of noise. The cover of the furnace was completely caved in and I'd broke the little door to the pilot light off its hinges. The thermostat dial was rolling around on the floor.

"Fixing the furnace," I told her.

"Mine could use some work," she said, and we both broke up. It felt good to laugh, until I saw she wasn't exactly laughing. She was crying, and not just sniffing either, but really crying from her heart, standing there with her



arms at her side, her palms turned half towards me like there was something she wanted.

This is what I could have done. I could have set down my baseball bat and put my arms around her, pulled her head against my shoulder and let her cry all she wanted. I might have stroked her hair and untangled some of the mats with my fingers, and sort of rocked her there until she stopped. Then I could have kissed her all over her face, and if she liked that, I could have pulled her into the room and shut the door behind us, turned out the light so she would have been more comfortable. I could have slipped that robe off her shoulders and told her I was sorry for smelling like a lumber mill. It was my job and all.

I didn't do any of that. I stood there watching her bawl. It must have seemed like a long time to her. Finally she ran down the stairs and the door slammed again. I got my down bag out of the closet and went to bed.

Chatten fed the planer and the wood came out my side, cleaned up rivers of wood, the grain wandering here and there but not getting anywhere, ever. He picked up another board and looked at it closely. I saw the nail in the middle of the board, just like I know Chatten must have seen it, and I saw the smile on his face as he eased the wood into the planer.

If a planer sounds like a jet, then a planer ruining its knives on a sixteen penny nail sounds like a jet coming apart at the seams. I ran around the board coming through my side and tried to shut the machine off. Chatten was supposedly doing the same thing, but somehow his hands got in the way of mine and neither one of us managed to shut the planer down before the nail did its damage. Then Chatten pushed the reverse button and backed the board, nail and all, into the knives again. I heard the same horrible noise, had the same awful crashing feeling. Chatten shifted the planer into high, grinding the gears like a fifteen-year-old girl in her first driver's training class. That was too much. One of the knives broke and small steel scraps flew like buckshot across the mill floor. I finally outmaneuvered Chatten and hit the kill switch.

With the planer down, the mill was quiet. I looked around to see if anybody got hurt, but all I saw was Duffy jumping off the forklift, running towards us, his face already twisted into a mean look.

"Goddam, goddam!" he yelled. And then the door opened to the lunchroom and out came the boss himself, Mr. Andrew T. Henries, all five feet five inches of him, walking in that peculiar way he has like he's constipated, like something is stuck down there where it counts.

That's when Chatten took off his hat.

He stopped Duffy cold in his tracks. Henries walked sideways up to the planer and asked through his nose, "What happened here?" but all the time he kept his eyes on Chatten's Mohican. Like the blame was there in that patch of hair. Chatten stepped back from the planer and scratched his scalp like he was

puzzled by the whole thing, too. Me, I picked up a crescent wrench.

"Only a fool could let this happen," said Henries to the foreman, though he obviously wasn't sure exactly what had happened. "A fool or worse," he said, looking across at Chatten who was grinning a crazy grin and leaning on an oak four by four, a board about the length of a baseball bat but twice as thick.

And Chatten was grinning right into Duffy's face when Duffy said, "Squaw man."

Chatten started to swing that four by four but I was quicker than he was. I beat him to the punch. I caught Duffy across the forehead with the crescent wrench. I hit him hard. I knew I'd have to if I didn't want him getting up. The foreman sat right down, but he stayed down, a pretty magnificent cut opening up over one eye, and Henries started screaming at me, grabbing hold of my arm.

Try as I would, I couldn't shake him loose. Chatten looked confused. He'd wanted to hit Duffy but Duffy was cold on the floor. People came running from all over the mill. The Hmonges were shouting something nobody could understand and Vernon Waddy, for some reason, grabbed the night-watchman's flashlight and shined it into my eyes. Henries stomped on my foot and got the wrench away from me, then this guy Turner, thinking he had to be cute, tried to wrestle me to the ground. Chatten popped him with the four by four, which had everyone ganging up on us. The last thing I saw before they got the best of me was Chatten taking a good swing at Henries and Henries backing through the lunchroom door.

They called it a riot, but Duffy was the only one who got hurt bad. He already had three concussions from football, and they say those things get worse the more you have. He was in St. Pats for a week.

In spite of all I did, Chatten still ended up in trouble. Seems he was on probation for beating hell out of some guy up on the reservation. Who would have imagined that? Maybe someone didn't like seeing him with an Indian woman and they fought. He never told me about it.

There's always been an honorable way to settle differences in the west, according to Judge Kirby, but hitting a man with a wrench is dishonorable. He said he'd reduce my sentence if I'd only tell him why I did it. I didn't tell him anything.

But if I'd been able to say it in so many words, I'd have told him about Chatten's wife, how she was pregnant and how she studied her books at their kitchen table. I would have tried to tell him how onions smelled in a warm kitchen and how that smell is nice to walk in to from the snow. And if that judge looked like he understood, I might have even told him about the unicorn on their living room rug, how that reminded me of my grandmother in Polson who was a sweet and graceful lady, and how it was the exact same one as in



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a picture book she had of unicorns and mermaids and men who were goats from the waist down.